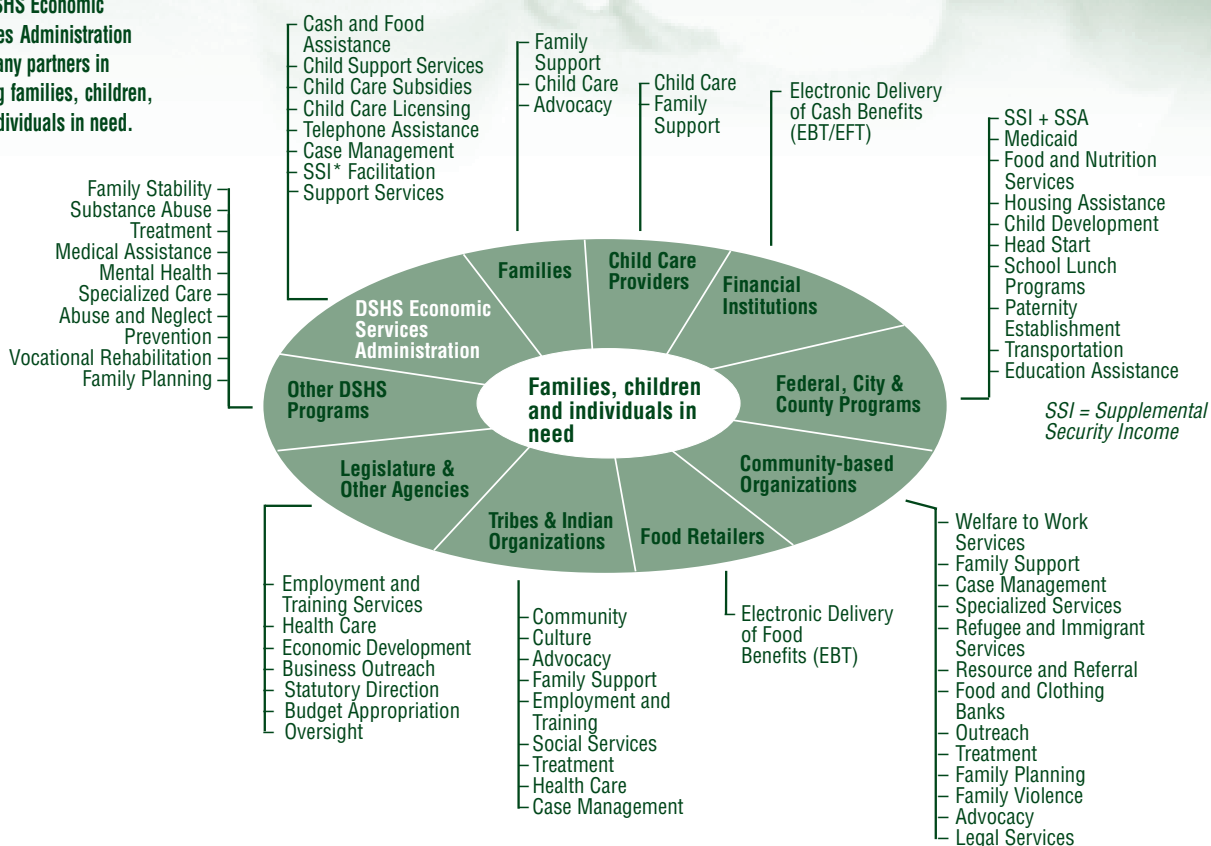




The DSHS Economic Services Administration has many partners in helping families, children, and individuals in need.



Combating poverty:

The Economic Services Administration

The Economic Services Administration (ESA) provides people in need with the resources they need to make ends meet: food assistance, cash benefits, Medicaid health insurance, help to get and keep a job, child care, and help to collect child support.

The administration's 64 Community Services Offices (CSOs) help people in need connect with many of the services provided by DSHS and its partners. For people in need, the local Community Services Office is often the entry point to the state and local human service system.

Thirty years ago when DSHS was first created, CSOs actually housed a variety of DSHS programs, including the Children's Administration, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and services for people with disabilities and the elderly. Over time, these programs moved out of CSOs, so that the CSO became known as "the welfare office."

Today, the functions of the CSO are changing. Many transactions - such as applications, address changes and routine status reports can be done over the phone or via the Internet. New uses of technology and new, work-oriented programs are changing the role of CSO staff from processing paperwork and determining eligibility to providing case management services to help people gain economic independence.

In addition to providing economic help to people in need, ESA is also home to the Division of Child Care and Early Learning, which licenses child care homes and centers, and provides training and technical assistance to child care providers, and child care subsidies to low-wage working parents.

The ESA Division of Child Support improves the lives of children by helping custodial parents of all income levels collect child support from noncustodial parents.

Economic Assistance Programs

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is the federal umbrella program for people in need, and the product of the 1996 federal welfare reform act. WorkFirst, which helps parents find jobs, is by far the largest component of TANF. But TANF also provides a small monthly

grant to aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other relatives who care for children who would otherwise be in foster care, and for immigrants whose children are American citizens. Children in these circumstances comprise 27 percent of all TANF participants.

TANF also provides monthly cash benefits and health insurance (Medicaid) to people who are caring for a child with a disability and to grandparents over the age of 55 who

Residents Receiving DSHS Services: SFY 2000

DSHS Services by Program	Total Clients
Economic Services Administration	673,950
WorkFirst Participation	103,135
ORIA* and Case Management	35,845
Supplemental Security Income (SSI)	115,400
TANF/SFA* Grants	276,780
Diversion	6,840
CEAP*	1,845
ESA Child care	168,470
GA-U and GA-X*	31,320
Food Assistance	515,845
Refugee Grants	1,975
Miscellaneous	26,020

*ORIA = Refugee and Immigrant Assistance

*TANF/SFA = Temporary Assistance for Needy Families/State Family Assistance

*CEAP = Consolidated Emergency Assistance Program

*GA-U and GA-X = General Assistance-Unemployable and General Assistance-Expedited Medicaid

Source: The DSHS Client Data Base, Research and Data Analysis FY 2000

are raising children. In our state, the five-year limit on benefits does not apply to these people because working full-time is not a realistic option for them.

WorkFirst

The original purpose of welfare was to support divorced or widowed mothers while they stayed at home and raised their children. But by the 1990s, the majority of

mothers were in the workforce, and public support for welfare had waned. Working people - especially low-wage working parents - had become resentful of non-working parents who received health insurance and other benefits that were not provided to many of those who held jobs.

Studies found that people on welfare (mostly single mothers) fell into three groups: Those who used welfare for just a few months while they recovered from a divorce or other life crisis; those who cycled back and forth between work and welfare; and those who stayed on welfare for many years, and for whom welfare became a way of life.

In 1996, national welfare reform legislation abolished welfare for those able to work, and replaced it with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) - a program designed to help parents find and keep jobs. The national legislation required that each state design its own work-oriented program, and created a five-year lifetime limit for cash assistance. It also restricted access to most benefits for legal immigrants.

Just over half the funding for welfare - and for the work-oriented programs that replaced it - comes from the federal government.

When the national welfare legislation passed, the U. S. Congress agreed to hold federal funding at its 1994 level for five years. This meant that if states succeeded in getting people off welfare and into



jobs, they could keep the money they saved and use it to fund job training, child care, and other services that help people get jobs, keep jobs, and move up a career ladder.

In 1997, the Washington Legislature created WorkFirst in order to comply with the new federal legislation. But Washington's Legislature and Governor refused to go along with the exclusion of legal immigrants. They created state-paid programs - including state-paid food stamps - to make up for the loss of federal programs for legal immigrants.

WorkFirst is a partnership between four state agencies: DSHS, the Employment Security Department, the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, and the Office of Trade and Economic Development. Hundreds of community organizations, employers, tribal governments, labor organizations, child care providers and other agencies are also partners in this program.

The DSHS Community Services Offices are the entry point and ongoing contact point for WorkFirst participants. After determining a family's eligibility for WorkFirst, CSO staff provide an orientation to the program, and assign a case manager to each family. This case manager works with each participant throughout the process, helping develop a plan for employment, encouraging progress towards the goal of getting a job, and arranging for the services - such as transportation or clothing assistance - that people need to succeed.

People who are able to work must start looking for a job or attending job preparation workshops provided by the Employment Security Department immediately. If people have barriers to work such as drug or alcohol addiction, severe depression, or lack of workplace skills, they are referred to services to address and remove those barriers.

In some instances, people may go to short-term job training programs in community colleges, or work in subsidized community service jobs to learn basic skills. Some people may also attend English as a Second Language classes as a part of their preparation for work. As a part of WorkFirst, community and technical colleges have developed many new programs that provide job training tailored to the needs of local employers.

WorkFirst focuses on helping people get what they need to work - whether it's an emergency car repair, a haircut, or a stable place to live. WorkFirst funding can also be used to provide emergency, one-time cash grants to low-wage working people who need help to resolve an emergency that would otherwise prevent them from working. Emergency assistance is also available to extremely poor people who need immediate help to provide their children with food, shelter, clothing, or medical care.

WorkFirst holds people accountable for carrying out their "Individual Responsibility Plan," which includes their commitments to attend school or job training, look for work, or work. People who refuse to participate are penalized by having their cash assistance reduced until they resume participation.

In the first years of its existence, WorkFirst succeeded in dramatically reducing the number of people who receive cash assistance and helped thousands of people get jobs, increase their income, and lead better, more satisfying and productive lives.

General Assistance and Food Assistance

In addition to WorkFirst, ESA provides assistance to people in need who aren't raising children, and food assistance to all low-income people.

General Assistance-Unemployable (GAU) cash grants are provided

to adults who are too ill or disabled to work. In most cases, people receive this help while they are waiting to qualify for the long-term federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program. It usually takes several months to process federal SSI applications. The federal SSI grant is \$545 for one adult, compared to the GAU grant of only \$339. When people are finally approved for SSI, the federal government reimburses the state for a portion of their GAU grants and medical assistance.

Food assistance used to be called "food stamps," but it is now provided via an electronic benefits transfer card that is used like a debit card. Food assistance is available to all households with incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level. Most food assistance is provided by a federal program of the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). There is also a state-paid food assistance program for legal immigrants, who are excluded by the federal government from the USDA program. The state-only food assistance program mirrors the federal program in eligibility and benefits; the only difference is the funding source.



Help for refugees and immigrants

Under the terms of the 1996 federal welfare reform act, legal immigrants who arrived in this country after the act was passed are barred for five years from receiving benefits afforded to other low-income or unemployed people. More recently, Congress relented and allowed recent immigrants who are children, elderly, or have disabilities to receive food assistance. The Washington State Legislature created a State Family Assistance Program (identical in structure and benefits to WorkFirst) to fill this gap, as well as a state-only food assistance program.

Refugees receive eight months of assistance if they do not have children; if they do have children, they are eligible for WorkFirst, including help to learn English, find a job, and enroll in job training or education programs.

Child care

WorkFirst has dramatically expanded the state's capacity to help low-wage workers with the cost of child care. Funding that used to go to welfare grants now pays child care costs for people with incomes up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Currently, over 70,000 children receive subsidized care through the Working Connections Child Care program, and only about a quarter of them are from families participating in WorkFirst.

Not all those who qualify for child care subsidies receive them. Some people rely on relatives or friends who do not want to be paid; others work when their children are in school or being cared for by their partner; some do not know that they are eligible for subsidies.

State payments for subsidized child care are set at 58 percent of the median cost of care, which means that in many settings, the state pays less than private-pay clients. Child care providers who customarily charge more than the state reimbursement rate must decide whether they are willing to accept state-paid clients at less than their usual fee.

Child care is beset by chronic problems of staffing, pricing, and stability. Child care, like home care for the elderly, is a low-wage profession with very limited opportunities for promotion and advancement. There is

a constant tension between the goals of keeping child care affordable and improving its quality. If the state were to significantly raise the rates it pays for child care, it would probably drive up the price for private-pay clients as well.

State licensors inspect and license child care centers and homes where unrelated children are cared for. Licenses are issued for three years. Family home child care providers are inspected once every 18 months; child care centers are inspected annually. There are also many child care providers who are exempt from licensing requirements. These include people who care for children in the child's home, those who care for close relatives, and those provide only occasional care for which they are paid less than \$1,000 per year.

Child Care Resources

Services: Provide child care information and referrals to families, child care providers, employers, government agencies and other organizations; consultation and training to child care providers. Support is available by telephone, Web site (www.childcare.org) and personal contact.

Communities served: King County

DSHS clients: 3,254 in 2001

Private as well as public clients? Yes

Employees: 40

DSHS or federal funding brought into the community through contract with DSHS: Annual budget of \$3.4 million, including \$1.8 million in payroll/provider support and \$650,500 for child care scholarships



The state's method for ensuring quality of care is based on licensing requirements, which establish minimum standards of staff training and health and safety. There is a growing body of research that has established "best practices" for child care that promote child development and early learning, but the state does not require child care providers to use them.

Parents who want information about licensed caregivers can call a statewide toll-free number (1-866-48-CHECK) to find out if there have been licensing issues or complaints about a caregiver, and can ask to speak to the person who inspected and licensed the home or center, but child care providers are not required (as nursing homes are) to have this information on hand and to share it with consumers when asked to do so.

The world of child care licensing, subsidies, and governance is separate from early childhood education programs such as the federal Head Start program and the state's Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program. Child development experts believe that child care is inseparable from early learning, and that the two ought to be merged, but there is no near-term prospect of this happening because the separation of "care" and "education" is such a longstanding tradition.

Child support

Regular child support payments can make the critical difference between poverty and self-sufficiency for many families. Financial support of children is also a fundamental responsibility of parenthood. In the last decade or more, our society has become much more emphatic about the importance of this responsibility, and both federal and state laws have reflected this new emphasis.

The Division of Child Support helps more than 300,000 custodial parents collect a total of over \$600 million in child support payments each year for a total of 420,000 children. Child Support services include establishing paternity, finding absent parents, and establishing financial and medical support to children to help families become or remain economically self-sufficient.

Washington, like most other states, has passed laws making it harder for parents to evade child support responsibilities. Washington's child support program ranks among the best in the nation in collecting the full amount of child support due.

There has been a growing national recognition that children need financial and medical support from noncustodial parents. This has given rise to a growing emphasis on promoting responsible fatherhood. The Division of Child Support has been involved in ongoing TV and radio campaigns with the Seattle Seahawks and the Seattle Mariners, and works with local communities and the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement to sponsor initiatives that promote responsible fatherhood.

Challenges for the Economic Services Administration

Restoring the promise of upward mobility

Federal and state welfare reform legislation didn't just reform welfare; it ended it. In its place, we now have an employment-focused program that is expanding the ranks of low-wage workers. The promise of WorkFirst is "a job, a better job, a better life." But for many low-wage workers, the promise of upward mobility may still be a mirage.

Short-term job training and community college programs are helping some people move up a career ladder, and Washington has focused more effort and made more progress on wage progression than most other states. Innovative training programs, partnerships with employers, and flexible scheduling of community college classes and child care programs have been essential to this effort.

Finding ways to accelerate progress so that more families can truly lift themselves out of poverty is an enormous challenge - not solely for ESA, but for all the partner agencies, community colleges, employers, policymakers, and other partners involved in this effort.

Building a system of supports for low-wage working families

Another challenge that arises from WorkFirst - and requires the attention of all WorkFirst partners and state and national policymakers - is the plight of the growing number of low-wage workers in today's economy.

The end of welfare ought to be the beginning of a new focus on the twenty first century poor: people who work in low-wage service sector jobs. To stay in the workforce, these workers need affordable health insurance, child care, housing and transportation - not to mention retirement benefits. Yet the jobs they hold are the least likely to provide the traditional benefits of



Photo by Walt Bowen

health insurance and retirement, much less help with child care, housing, or transportation.

These are people who work hard, pay taxes, and contribute to their communities. Some are people who have a genuine calling to provide personal care to the ill, the elderly or to people with disabilities. Others harvest, process, or serve the food we eat, keep our workplaces clean, or change the oil in our cars. These are essential services. But the people who perform them live precariously, always one paycheck, one illness, or one unexpected expense away from economic disaster.

WorkFirst's emergency assistance programs and child care subsidies are important to this sector of our workforce. But more must be done to refocus the public policy process on creating a solid floor of affordable health insurance, housing, child care, transportation, and retirement benefits under the feet of these workers.

Redesigning service delivery and integrating services

WorkFirst fundamentally changes the work of people who staff ESA's Community Services Offices. Instead of simply determining who is eligible for benefits, they now help clients find jobs, and overcome the barriers that sometimes prevent people from getting a job. This means helping people get mental health care, drug and alcohol treatment, health care, transportation, and other services they need to become employable, look for a job, and go to work. It means acting as coach, mentor, cheerleader - and it also means holding clients accountable for abiding by the terms of their Individual Responsibility Plans. To do this, staff must coordinate and communicate with other programs within DSHS, and with a multitude of community organizations, employers, and community colleges. They must also develop new skills to effectively motivate and support clients' difficult journey from joblessness to success in the workplace. This challenge is further complicated by the fact that CSO staff is being reduced because of smaller caseloads and state budget shortfalls.

Together, these circumstances have heightened the need to find more efficient ways to help people get the services they need. Fortunately, new uses of the Internet and telephone communication make new efficiencies possible. More business is now transacted through call centers that process routine changes and eligibility

Amor Case Management Services, Olympia

Services: Work Experience, Whole Family Service, Intensive In-Home Service, Job Retention Services

Communities served: Thurston, Mason, Lewis Counties

DSHS clients: 11 current clients (Past clients: over 500)

Private as well as public clients? N/A

Year formed: 1999

Employees: 2

functions. An online CSO makes it possible to apply for benefits from any computer, and scanners make it possible to create electronic files that replace mounds of paper. All of these advances help CSOs free up staff time to spend face-to-face with clients, and to meet the multiple needs of families.

Improving child care

The undeniable economic reality of American life is that most parents have jobs, and that infants, toddlers, and children need high quality care while their parents are at work. But social policy and economic reality have yet to line up. Our public school system holds fast to a program design created during a time when mothers welcomed children home each afternoon with cookies and milk, and spent summer days ferrying them to the local beach or swimming pool.

For infants and young children, there is a patchwork of programs that can scarcely be called a system. Families just above the income level for child care subsidies experience great difficulty finding affordable, high-quality care for children, and even those who do qualify for subsidies may have trouble finding care that is accessible and reliable.

Re-thinking and re-engineering the relationship between child care and education would seem to be a high priority given both the economic reality of working parents and the wealth of recent research on early brain development and its long-term impact. But progress in this area has been slow. Our society has yet to fully recognize the economic reality of working parents and the critical importance of children's early learning.